



# Evaluation of the EU's engagement with Civil Society in the enlargement, neighbourhood regions and Russia over the period 2007-2018

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Executive Summary

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*Evaluation carried out on behalf of the European Commission*



Lead Implementing Partner in  
partnership with

Adam Smith  
International



PROMAN

Centrum für Evaluation  
**CEval**  
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INTEGRITY



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## **Evaluation of EU Support to Civil Society in the Enlargement, Neighbourhood regions and Russia over the period 2007-2018**

**This evaluation was commissioned by the  
MFF, Programming and Evaluation Unit  
of the DG NEAR (European Commission)**

*The opinions expressed in this document represent the authors' points of view  
which are not necessarily shared by the European Commission  
or by the authorities of the countries involved.*

# Executive summary

## The evaluation's purpose, scope and background

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This evaluation contributes to accountability, learning and improvement of policy and practice in relation to the EU's engagement with civil society in the Enlargement, Neighbourhood regions and Russia, between 2007 and 2018. The evaluation covers:

- **targeted financial support**, where actions are intended to strengthen the participation of civil society;
- **mainstreamed support**, i.e. support to civil society, as implementing partners, within EU sectoral cooperation, and in non-financial efforts of the EU to promote the inclusion of civil society organisations (CSOs) into sectoral policy dialogue;
- **policy-level engagement with civil society**, e.g. through policy dialogue, multi-stakeholder fora, consultations involving civil society organisations, in areas not covered by mainstreaming (above).

The geographical scope of the evaluation covers:

- **Enlargement region (i.e. candidates and potential candidates):** Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo\*, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia, Turkey;
- **Neighbourhood East:** Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine;
- **Neighbourhood South:** Algeria, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Palestine\*\*, Syria, Tunisia;
- **The Russian Federation.**

## Overall methodological approach

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The evaluation was conducted between July 2018 and March 2020 by a team of senior evaluation experts with thematic experience in civil society, and in-depth knowledge of the regions covered by the evaluation. It consisted of four key phases: i) inception phase; ii) desk phase; iii) field phase; and iv) synthesis and reporting phase.

The evaluation methodology adopted a theory-based approach, guided by a series of reconstructed intervention logics (RILs), one for each sub-region. The RILs represent an evaluation tool, used to understand the 'intended' route, outcomes and eventual impact of the EU's support to civil society. They provide a framework on which key evaluation questions are mapped, in order to observe the extent to which key factors, influences and processes have either contributed to or hindered the achievement of results, and identify any unintended positive or negative outcomes.

The evaluation team created an inventory of EU actions which they classified as targeted or mainstreamed support to civil society. A sample of actions and non-financial initiatives were selected for document review and interview. No interviews were carried out with Russia-based stakeholders for security reasons. Two online surveys (one for EU staff responsible for the oversight of civil society engagement in the regions covered in the evaluation, based either in EUDs or in Brussels, and one for civil society respondents) were designed to extend the outreach to respondents across the regions covered in the evaluation. Document review included action-level documents, Call for Proposal documentation, Financing Decisions, Country Strategy Papers, Single Support Frameworks, Roadmaps for Engagement with Civil Society, thematic studies and evaluations, and training and information materials for EU staff. Field missions were conducted in all regions<sup>i</sup> apart from Russia,

\* This designation is without prejudice to positions on status and is in line with UNSCR 1244(1999) and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence.

\*\* This designation shall not be construed as recognition of a State of Palestine and is without prejudice to the individual positions of the Member States on this issue.

<sup>i</sup> Missions were conducted in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Morocco, Israel, Palestine, Armenia, Belarus, Georgia and Ukraine.

during which interviews were carried out with EU staff and CSO (grant beneficiary) representatives. Other stakeholders consulted for the evaluation included participants in regional civil society events and staff in European Commission (EC) headquarters in Brussels.

## Overview of funds contracted to actions supporting civil society

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In compiling an inventory of support to civil society, the evaluators have attempted to quantify the financial support that has been provided by the EU to civil society, and to differentiate between support that is 'targeted' and that which can be considered 'mainstreamed'. In order to obtain the most accurate picture, the analysis focussed on the last five years (2013-2018) only. In this period, the EU provided approximately EUR 250m of targeted and mainstreamed support annually. This figure represents **7% of total EU funds** contracted for external action in the regions covered by this evaluation. The relative importance of targeted and mainstreamed actions in the portfolio of EU-co-financed actions implemented by CSOs was similar in the Enlargement, Neighbourhood East and Neighbourhood South regions.

In the Enlargement region, there is no specific commitment earmarked for civil society in the geographical programme. However, targeted and mainstreamed support represented approximately 5% of EU funds contracted in these countries in 2013-2018: this included 9% in the Western Balkans and 1% in Turkey, where the environment is increasingly challenging for CSOs.

In the Eastern Neighbourhood, most country-level Single Support Frameworks (SSFs) earmark 5% of funds for civil society. The EU met this level of funding in most countries, through a combination of geographic and thematic programme spending.

In the Southern Neighbourhood, most country-level Single Support Frameworks (SSFs) also earmark 5% of funds for civil society. Several countries (Algeria, Egypt, Morocco) subsume civil society support into a broader category of capacity development for partner country stakeholders. The EU met this level of funding in most countries, through a combination of geographic and thematic programme spending. Most of the EU funds contracted to support civil society are delivered through mainstreamed rather than targeted support.

The geographic instruments provide more than 80% of EU funds contracted to targeted and mainstreamed support. Most of the rest comes from the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR) and Civil Society Organisations-Local Authorities (CSO-LA) thematic programmes.

While the volume of funds contracted as either targeted or mainstreamed support to civil society has remained stable over the last five years, this is in striking contrast to the significant increase in funds contracted for the rest of EU cooperation in the countries covered by this evaluation. Between 2013 and 2018, the volume of contracted targeted and mainstreamed support to CSOs dropped by 20%, while the contracted volume of other types of EU operational support increased by 57%.

## Main findings and conclusions

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**Relevance:** the operating environment for civil society naturally varies from country to country, and yet there are distinct themes within the political contexts of the three main regions of this evaluation which have driven the EU's objectives and strategic approach in supporting civil society. In the Enlargement region, the EU accession process has defined the direction and nature of EU support, and the main financial instrument, the Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance (IPA), has strengthened and systematised the participation of civil society in programming and implementation. Where the environment for civil society has become more restricted, for example in Turkey and also in Serbia and Bosnia Herzegovina, the EU has adjusted its approach in response. This has also been the case in the Neighbourhood South where the EU has adapted to dramatic shifts in democratic processes, and also in the Neighbourhood East and in Russia where the EU has continued to find mechanisms to support civil society even when space has been shrinking over the period of the evaluation. For example, support to CSO engagement on non-controversial themes and mainstreaming of civil society in non-controversial sectors of EU cooperation can provide legitimacy and support to CSOs even when there is shrinking space for them to participate in democratic processes. Roadmaps for Engagement with Civil Society (Neighbourhood countries) have found wide acceptance as a tool for joint analysis and elaboration of common priorities.

Within these contexts, the EU has sought to understand and better address the needs of civil society through more systematic consultation processes which feed into the design and implementation of targeted support, and facilitate civil society's engagement in policy dialogue. In this area, good examples can be seen, but there remains more that can be done to increase representation across civil society, and make this more meaningful, for example by improving follow-up. The EU has developed a range of modalities to deliver support to civil

society, and having this choice of options at its disposal has allowed it to cater more appropriately to the diversity of the civil society sector, which ranges from small non-governmental organisations (NGOs), operating at the grassroots level, to large international organisations. In all regions, Financial Support to Third Parties (FTSP) is regarded as one of the most effective new ways of extending EU support to civil society. The significant number of actions implemented by CSOs (27% of the total number of contracts for operational support to the regions of this evaluation) enables the EU to address a wide range of niche issues, respond rapidly to emerging issues, and support a range of experimental and pilot initiatives.

Stakeholder perceptions on the relevance of EU support to civil society are mostly positive or highly positive. In fact, critical comments on policy issues reported to the evaluators almost exclusively related to perceived inconsistencies, or issues where stakeholders considered that the EU should be more consistent and even more determined in the pursuit of the three priorities of the European Commission's 2012 Communication: 'The roots of democracy and sustainable development: Europe's engagement with civil society in external relations' (2012), which are: (i) to enhance efforts to promote a conducive environment for CSOs in partner countries; (ii) to promote a meaningful and structured participation of CSOs in domestic policies of partner countries, in the EU programming cycle and in international processes; and (iii) to increase local CSOs' capacity to perform their roles as independent development actors more effectively. There is no significant stakeholder or group of stakeholders in the Enlargement candidates and potential candidates and neighbourhood countries proposing a reduction in EU support or even a significantly different approach to funding.

**Efficiency:** targeted and mainstreamed support to civil society represents 27% of the total number of contracts for operational support to the regions covered by this evaluation. This implies a significant commitment of EU staff time, particularly at EU Delegation (EUD) level. In a context of human resource constraints, the management of a large number of small contracts with CSOs continues to represent a significant efficiency challenge. While EUDs consider efficiency when making decisions on the most appropriate instruments and modalities to deploy, other factors such as suitability of the thematic coverage/target beneficiaries of the instrument and availability of funds are also key considerations. The FSTP modality is increasingly regarded as a cost-effective means through which to reach grassroots CSOs. An unintended consequence of FSTP, however, is that, while support delivered through grant programmes may be more cost-efficient at the EUD level, it favours the larger, international CSOs who have the organisational capacity to administer grant programmes. Medium level, national CSOs may be excluded since they are too large to participate as sub-grantees, and yet lack capacity to participate as lead organisations. Mainstreaming of civil society shows promise as a cost-effective means of widening and systematising support to civil society and is promoted by the EU. However, current EU systems are inadequate for measuring the cost-effectiveness of this approach.

**Effectiveness:** the EU's engagement with civil society has been highly effective at enhancing the role of civil society actors in policy dialogue processes, such as policy consultations, networks and national and regional civil society forums. However, the effectiveness of targeted financial support has sometimes been criticised for being too oriented towards EU systems and procedures. Rules and procedures associated with applying for and implementing actions in response to Calls for Proposals (CfPs), such as competitive procedures, one-off grants and lack of extension opportunities, do not encourage the kind of long-term capacity strengthening that CSOs require to become 'professionalised'. As mentioned, the EU has made significant use of FSTP for extending support to smaller, grassroots CSOs who lack the organisational capacity to independently apply for EU support in response to regular CfPs. However, at present, this remains concentrated in cooperation on themes of good governance, human rights and gender equality, with less use in other sectors of cooperation. The quantitative analysis conducted by this evaluation has found that a significant level of support is provided through mainstreaming which is a strategy that has been increasingly promoted by the EC as a way of systematically integrating civil society into all areas of cooperation, as has been occurring in the Neighbourhood South, in particular, over many years. However, feedback from this evaluation also suggests that, while the evidence shows that mainstreaming is commonplace, the concept is not widely and consistently understood by EUDs. As mentioned above, there is currently a lack of appropriate monitoring and evaluation (M&E) tools to measure the effectiveness of mainstreaming as a way of providing support to civil society.

At present, EU systems do not effectively capture and report on the quantity and quality of civil society support across the board. A high proportion of actions implemented by CSOs are classified as support to governance and civil society, rather than using the DAC sector codes that are allocated to actions implemented by other types of organisation. In addition, the evaluation did not identify effective EU monitoring tools or reporting systems that tracked, for example, the divergence in Neighbourhood partner countries between indicative commitments to civil society in Single Support Frameworks (SSFs) and actual funds committed in Financing Decisions (FDs) or, in both Neighbourhood and Enlargement regions, the volumes and thematic distribution of



targeted and mainstreamed support. The EU's OPSYS<sup>ii</sup> data management system does not record beneficiaries of FSTP, or permit the aggregation of data on grant size or on number of beneficiaries.

**Impact:** the long-term impacts of the EU's engagement with civil society vary across the regions of this evaluation, reflecting the differing political objectives that have governed its support to its Neighbourhood and Enlargement regions and partners. In the Neighbourhood South, the EU's integrated approach, which has adapted to dramatic political changes over time, has contributed to the 'professionalisation' of CSOs enabling them to act independently and credibly across a range of civil society interests, and CSOs have been particularly successful when they have benefited from long-term support, combined with advocacy and policy dialogue opportunities. In the Enlargement region, EU accession has provided a framework for civil society engagement, and the EU has strongly promoted and supported civil society as an integral part of the IPA instrument, ensuring an active role in the enlargement process. At the same time, the EU has encouraged governments to put in place legislation and policy to improve government's recognition of civil society, and enhance their cooperation, although these are not yet established firmly enough to ensure long-term sustainability, as evidence from the situation in Turkey illustrates. In the Neighbourhood East, the EU's engagement with civil society has been significant in increasing the capacity of civil society organisations. This was most notable in the field of policy consultations and dialogue, both at national and bilateral and international level, where CSOs' competencies have increased across the board. The EU's structured approach to involving CSOs in policymaking has helped raise the profile and significance of civil society in policy dialogues in most Eastern Partnership countries.

**Sustainability:** there has been a gradual increase in the sustainability of civil society over the period covered by this evaluation. The EU has contributed to mitigating negative developments in the enabling environment and assisting CSOs in adapting, and modest improvements which can be associated with EU support to CSOs and to partner country governments have taken place in the enabling environment in some countries. The evaluation did not identify significant improvements in financial sustainability of CSO grant beneficiaries during the period covered by this evaluation. EU strategies and guidelines increasingly articulate a broad conception of capacity development that goes beyond grant application capacity. However, this evaluation did not find significant evidence of a corresponding diversification of capacity strengthening support. Despite significant and sustained investment in civil society capacity development, the EU continues to deal with a largely donor-dependent sector of CSOs. The competitive grant award procedure does not allow the EU to offer second phase financing to successful grant beneficiaries through direct awards, but some CSOs nevertheless receive follow up funding under competitive procedures. The themes and timing of CfPs vary, and selection and contracting of grants can take a long time. In this context, many CSOs demobilise professional staff, or shift from one theme to another to adjust to the availability of funds. The EU continues to provide significant capacity development support to improve applicants' ability to apply for one-off competitive grant funding, with rather less investment in capacity development support that might assist CSOs in diversification of income, and development of local resource mobilisation.

**Coordination, complementarity and coherence:** the EU has invested significant efforts in promotion of coordination with Member States (MS) and like-minded donors. These donors have participated actively in EUD-coordinated elaboration of European Joint Programming, Guidelines for Civil Society (Enlargement candidates and potential candidates) and Roadmaps for Engagement with Civil Society (Neighbourhood countries). Coherence and complementarity have been improved overall, although MS cooperation in some Southern Neighbourhood countries is still affected by the divergent political assessments and priorities of EU services and MS.

**EU added-value:** the EU has maintained a presence as a major donor to civil society in all countries covered by this evaluation, in a period when many MS, donors, private foundations and international CSOs have reduced their grant-making activity. In the move towards joint programming, many EU Member States have reduced their support to civil society, particularly on themes of enabling environment and capacity development, which are a key focus of EU engagement in all countries. They have also increasingly adjusted their own support to seek complementarity with EU initiatives.

In the Western Balkans, Turkey, Moldova, Ukraine and Georgia, the changes to which the EU contributed could not have happened in its absence. In the Neighbourhood South, Belarus, Azerbaijan and Armenia, the changes to which the EU contributed could have happened without EU support but would have taken longer and with less probability of success, and the high volume of EU support would not have been replicated by other donors had the EU have withdrawn its support. In the Enlargement region, the EU successfully leverages political and operational dimensions for mutual reinforcement; and MS and like-minded donors would not have had the same influence. These dynamics are also present in the Neighbourhood countries, but the incentives that the EU has

<sup>ii</sup> OPSYS is an IT platform currently being developed by Commission services to effectively and efficiently manage the whole EU external relations portfolio of interventions.

to offer are more modest and do not enjoy such widespread support as in the Enlargement candidates and potential candidates.

## Key recommendations

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**The EU should strengthen its monitoring of the translation of policy commitments towards civil society into effective programming.** This particularly concerns the low alignment between earmarking of funds and contracting of targeted and mainstreamed funds, and the progress of mainstreaming of civil society. The EU could consider earmarking for civil society a specific proportion of bilateral funds allocated to the Enlargement candidates and potential candidates, as it does already in the SSF for the Neighbourhood countries.

**EUDs in the Enlargement and Neighbourhood regions should consider permitting FSTP in a greater proportion of Calls for Proposals, extending the use of this modality beyond the governance, human rights and gender equality thematic cluster where it is currently concentrated.** This would facilitate the engagement of a greater number and wider range of civil society actors. It could contribute to more grassroots and geographically diverse participation, as well as the engagement of specialised actors.

**DG NEAR should consider encouraging grant beneficiaries to use the modality of FSTP as the main purpose of the action.** This would allow existing foundations and grant-making CSOs to provide a large number of small grants using simplified and flexible procedures. This is particularly relevant in situations where the EU faces persistent difficulty reaching out to specific groups of civil society actors.

**The EU should improve its data management tools and M&E mechanisms, to better assess progress in strengthening support to civil society and outreach through FSTP.** Specifically, this would require additional functionalities in OPSYS as well as enhanced commitment of NEAR management to monitoring and reporting on targeted and mainstreamed support to civil society.

**The EU should continue to promote the strategy of mainstreaming of civil society support, and strengthen its institutional knowledge and capacity on how to put this strategy into practice** by sharing experience and lessons learned between countries and regions.